

Interrogatives for Explorers
urban exploration questions for reporters

Courtesy of the Twin Cities Urban Exploration Cabal
<http://www.tcuec.com>

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Introduction

This document is intended to help reporters and other media professionals in their coverage of urban exploration. Specifically, it provides reasoned advice on both the questions to ask, and the questions not to ask, when conducting interviews about urban exploration or urban explorers, as well as some very basic background information.

The intent is certainly not to mandate what should and should not be asked (nor, from the other end, what will or will not, or should or should not, be answered), but to provide a little help in producing a better article. We, the urban explorers, have just as much interest in being covered well as you have in covering us.

We know, we know; you need the who, what, when, where, why, and how. The thing is, you ask the same old tired questions, and you'll get the same old tired answers, and wind up producing the same old tired article. Sure, it fills the assignment and gets you a paycheck, but, come on, we can all do better.

Background

“Urban exploration”, sometimes abbreviated as UE or urbex, is a very broad term that encompasses a lot of activities. In general, it's “going places one shouldn't go”, the exploration of out-of-the-way, forgotten, generally inaccessible, or off-limits places. From workplace basements and rooftops, to vacant houses and abandoned factories, to storm drains, sewers, and utility tunnels, urban explorers attempt to satisfy their insatiable curiosity about the world around them. Sneaking in, sneaking out, and generally abiding by the motto “take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints”, urban explorers do their things largely unseen, unnoticed, and undetected.

Urban exploration is not an organized activity. There's no membership roster, no leader, no board of directors, no Star Council. Anyone is welcome, and free, to participate. Unfortunately, anyone, too, can call themselves an urban explorer, and it is not entirely uncommon to find vandals, thieves, and other miscreants who pay lip service to the philosophies of the hobby while stealing, leaving graffiti, or causing damage.

Please, do not confuse what urban explorers do, with where they do it. Not everyone who goes into abandoned buildings is an urban explorer. Indeed, in most places, most aren't.

Bad interrogatives

What's your favorite location?

This is a very common, and very bad, question. If you're fishing for interesting anecdotes, try something like "What's the funniest thing that's ever happened to you while exploring?" or "What's the most unexpected thing you've ever found?". The reason this is a bad question is threefold. First, there's a good chance that the answer is either going to be meaningless to laypeople ("*The NMT*") or require lengthy explanation to have any sort of meaning ("*Sheik's Cave*"). Secondly, the answer is both likely to change, with new discoveries, and will probably require a lot of qualifiers ("*Well, the Acme bottling plant was great, until it burned down; now my favorite building is probably the Blue Warehouse complex, and my favorite underground place would be the lower network of steam tunnels at the community college.*"). Thirdly, a lot of explorers know of obscure places they've never written about online, never published photographs of, and won't share with others they don't trust completely, so there's a good chance you won't be getting an honest answer, anyway.

How did you get involved in urban exploration?

Again, a common, and bad, question. Many explorers' interests and motivations change over time, and someone who became aware of urban exploration while researching urban planning, for example, might now do it out of a love of history, or an interest in photography, or for obscure philosophical reasons. It's probably more useful to ask "Why do you do what you do?", instead (and perhaps follow up with "Do you think (reason) justifies the means you use to (reason)?")

Isn't what you do dangerous?

Of course it's dangerous - for a given value of "dangerous", anyway. It's highly unlikely there's a single urban explorer who is unaware of the dangers, both legal and physical, of what they do. The risks explorers take they do so willingly, and knowingly, and they generally take considerable precautions to avoid unpleasantness. Please keep in mind that municipal spokespersons frequently exaggerate greatly the dangers of urban exploration, in (understandable) efforts to deter the idle curious from going places they oughtn't. To listen to some spokespeople, you'd think our towns and cities were full of buildings one gust of wind away from complete collapse, and undermined by crumbling, gas-filled tunnels likely to cave in at any moment. We all know this isn't the case, so please don't let exciting gloom-and-doom quotes override common sense.

How long have you been exploring?

Yes, yes, it adds human interest, but does anyone really care? In any event, the answer usually depends on how you define exploring, anyway. A decade ago, poking around abandoned farms and factories was just "kids being kids"; giving a new label to an old activity doesn't change history. A better question is probably "How often do you go out exploring?".

Son... have you ever been arrested?

Not as many urban explorers as you might think have, and the details are generally pretty uninteresting. Much better to ask "Have you ever almost gotten arrested while exploring?", instead.

What kinds of equipment do you use while exploring?

This isn't so much a bad question, as one that will waste your time. Many explorers have a well-stocked arsenal of clothing, flashlights, and sundry other equipment they take with them. Most will quite happily talk for some time about their equipment. None of it is terribly interesting, and at the end of the day, none of your readers/listeners/viewers really care about what brand of flashlight a given explorer prefers.

Good interrogatives

(or, at least, ones we'd like to see asked more often)

What's your favorite aspect of urban exploration?

Some people are all about the history. Others like taking pictures. Others get a thrill out of it. Some like rooftops; some like sewers. The answers to this one might well surprise you.

What's the funniest thing that's ever happened to you while exploring?

You want human-interest? Ask this question. Pretty much every urban explorer has had at least one (in retrospect) hilarious encounter of some sort. Whether it's being lectured by a police officer while hanging off a rope, halfway up the wall of a building, being "chased" out of a building by an aggressive pigeon, or something entirely different, the odds are good you'll get something interesting from this question.

What's the most unexpected thing you've ever found?

You (and your readers/listeners/viewers) would probably be amazed at the strange things explorers come across in drains, sewers, buildings, or wherever. It might be exciting (meth lab), it might be touching (stickers and photos in workers' lockers in a long-forgotten factory), it might be funny; you'll never know if you don't ask.

What's the appeal of urban exploration?

Seriously, it's worth a shot. Sure, you might be interviewing the least insightful, least articulate explorer around; oh well, that's sixty seconds of your life you're not getting back. On the other hand, you might just be interviewing a well-spoken English major able to wax poetically about his or her chosen pasttime, and wind up with the sort of "money quote" that grabs your editor's attention and gets your back-page article, morning-show interview, or 5pm news filler bumped up to the front page, drive-time, or a 10pm feature.

Erratra

Urban explorers come from all backgrounds and ways of life; few if any have any communications training or experience talking to the media. Ask yes or no questions, and you're likely to get monosyllabic answers. They're probably not intentionally being difficult, they just don't know any better.

By the nature of their pasttime, few urban explorers are terribly interested in publicity or willing to speak with the media, as you might have discovered. If you're just looking for background, make it clear that you're speaking off the record. If an explorer doesn't want to speak on the record, or doesn't want to be identified by their real name, please respect that.

Be very, very cautious about taking information from websites, except as background. Most urban exploration websites intended for general consumption, and many of those primarily meant for fellow explorers, contain at least a small amount of misinformation. The broad urban exploration community online, and many of the local or regional communities, have their fair share of inside jokes, euphemisms, and "pet terms", especially for locations, and it's very easy to misinterpret statements designed to intentionally mislead laypeople, or to mischaracterize parodies you don't "get". Some are, heh, detectable from, um, semantic cues, but others are less easily discerned. When time allows, try to get confirmation, even if off the record, of anything you hope to use off a website.

On a related note, if you are going to take quotes from websites, be particularly careful in attribution. A fair number of websites are run by small groups of people, with structures of differing degrees of formality. Posting on their forums, or even having articles on their website, does not automatically confer membership in that group - nor endorsement or approval of what they've written. Also, watch out for forums shared by multiple groups and websites, and the interesting attribution problems this can create. Too, be careful of making assumptions about androgynous and gender-neutral handles and nicknames; many areas have a surprisingly large contingent of female explorers, who probably won't be flattered to be mistaken for gentlemen.

If you are one of the fortunate few whose employer will let them accompany one or more urban explorers for a story, take careful note of the conditions and requirements the explorers may make, and respect them. The most common will probably be not showing, or disclosing, the way in or out of wherever you go. Don't shoot footage of this, don't let your photographer shoot stills of this, for any reason. Often these pictures or footage are the most interesting; don't shoot them, and your editor can't make you look like an ass for breaking your promises. If you're saddled with a weasel of an editor (and who isn't?) who might go wishy-washy and decide not to use photos or footage from inside your destination, shoot your tame explorers beforehand, meeting, or equipping themselves, checking their gear, and making last-minute preparations, in someplace like a park.